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WOMEN IN CNADA:
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND
OTHER CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Current Issue Review

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**WOMEN IN CANADA:
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND
OTHER CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**

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WOMEN IN CANADA: SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND OTHER CONTEMPORARY ISSUES*

ISSUE DEFINITION

Although a great deal of attention has been directed to the issue of women's status in Canada, women continue to face conditions that set them apart from men in our society. For example, Canadian women on average continue to earn less than men. This is reflected in the greater risk of poverty for women than for men, which is often linked to the inability of some women to leave violent living situations.

A number of policies and pieces of legislation have improved the status of Canadian women. Despite such measures, the evidence demonstrates that additional changes will be required before Canadian women enjoy the same rights and privileges of society as men. Evidence also suggests that eliminating inequality between men and women will require the simultaneous application of both long-term and short-term solutions.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

A. Understanding Inequality

Today many people tend to assume that society affords its members a high degree of equality. This assumption is based on a notion that, as society has evolved and modernized through the processes of urbanization and industrialization, many people have experienced benefits. These include health care, more stable job opportunities, improved educational options, longer life expectancy, etc. Yet, while there is no denying that contemporary Canadian society is

* The original version of this Current Issue Review was published in October 1991; the paper has been regularly updated since that time.

characterized by advances that have led to greater equality, statistics confirm that opportunities continue to be unequally distributed in our society.

In attempting to describe and analyze this unequal distribution of opportunities in Canada, social scientists have determined that there are a number of important dimensions to consider. They argue that opportunities and rewards are unevenly distributed on the basis of things such as income, ethnicity, age, region and gender. All are important in attempting to understand the current situation of any particular group in society because, ultimately, they all interact to create a set of social conditions. While this discussion focuses on issues and conditions facing all Canadian women, it is important to recall that these are cross-cut by considerations of ethnicity, age, regional location and socio-economic status.

B. Accounting for Gender Inequality

A number of explanations have been put forward to account for the persistence of gender inequality in our society: biological arguments, socialization theory and social-structural theories. The first two approaches tend to place more emphasis on individual characteristics, while the third emphasizes the part played by the structural organization of society.

Early work in the area of inequality in general, and gender and racial inequality in particular, tended to adopt a biological approach. Some researchers argued, for instance, that the basis for social inequality between men and women could be reduced to the "natural" physical and biological differences between the sexes. Consequently, the weight differences between male and female brains were measured, and hypotheses which asserted that the left and right sides of the brain could be linked to certain "female" and "male" qualities that were dominant in each respective gender, were explored. Other theories linked male behaviour and achievement to the presence of male sex hormones in men and their absence in women.

While there is, of course, no denying the physical differences between men and women, by and large such theories are given little contemporary weight. Critics of the "biological" explanations argue that they are fundamentally flawed because they cannot account for historical changes in the status of women and men. Neither can they account for cultural distinctiveness, especially where Western male and female "roles" are completely reversed.

Partly in response to the inadequacy of biological explanations, in the 1950s and 1960s more attention was paid to gender socialization. As the theory goes, early socialization patterns contribute to passivity in girls and women and aggressiveness in boys and men. Researchers examined the ways in which parents treated young girls and boys and determined that during infancy girls tended to be cuddled and caressed more than boys. During early childhood, toys, books, games and sports activities tended to reinforce the differences between the sexes, so that boys continued to be more confrontational and aggressive while girls were quiet and more retiring. As children reached adolescence and early adulthood, these differences were firmly entrenched. The theory argued that these differences were key to explaining not only gender differences but also gender inequality.

Critics of this approach insisted that, while socialization patterns may account for certain gender differences, they are not adequate for explaining or analyzing them. What are the origins of socialization patterns and dominant male and female roles? How can cross-cultural and historical differences be accommodated in socialization theory? These questions, along with the criticism that socialization theory tended to assume that the social actor was a "*tabula rasa*," upon which patterns of behaviour were deposited, called into question the adequacy of the theory for explaining gender inequality.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the women's movement actively engaged in explaining gender differences and inequalities. It would be a mistake to assume that there is widespread agreement among feminists as to the roots and/or the causes of gender inequality in Canada. Within feminist theorizing, there are divisions as to the basis for women's economic, social and political situation and ways of achieving social change. Nevertheless, some basic agreements allow us to distinguish between the previous attempts to account for gender inequality and those associated with the contemporary women's movement.

The key distinguishing feature of later attempts to understand and explain gender inequality is their focus on prevailing social/structural conditions. While current conditions are important, there is also a strong emphasis on the need to adopt a historical perspective. Contemporary issues are, from this vantage point, more fully understood by tracing historical changes in the organization of society and their impact on the status and condition of women and men.

The notion of unequal power in social relations and politics has also been central to many groups operating under the broad umbrella of the modern-day women's movement. The consequences of these unequal power relationships are seen to take many forms. A number of women's groups argue, for instance, that understanding women's position in society, whether inside the family or outside, can be accomplished only through a recognition of the unequal power relations between men and women.

This power imbalance is multi-dimensional. It is evidenced not only in terms of its physical consequences (rape, battering, sexual harassment) and mental consequences (long-standing mental cruelty, degradation), but also its economic dimensions (increased risk of poverty, wage gaps, primary responsibility for child care and domestic labour), political (lower political participation rates for women, lack of access to centres of decision-making) and cultural (representation of women in media, pornography).

This unequal distribution of power is seen as caused not by the individual proclivities of men and women but rather by society's economic organization. Power relations are structured into legal-judicial, political, cultural and social institutions and therefore, it is argued, they tend to be perpetuated. This means that efforts to alter social conditions must be directed at a number of levels and a multitude of institutions simultaneously.

The precise nature of reforms remains a contentious issue within the larger women's movement. Some groups direct their efforts toward creating change from within existing institutional structures. Others argue that it is ultimately more effective to create alternative "grass-roots" structures and bring about social change through challenging the status quo.

C. Economic Issues

While it is possible to categorize issues as economic, social or political, most issues have multiple dimensions so that distinctions are more analytical than real. It is widely agreed that the economic equality of women must first be vigorously pursued, because this tends to form a basis for achieving equality in other dimensions. In this context, women's labour market position has received attention.

1. Labour Market

Women's participation in the labour force has increased steadily since 1966, when it was 35.4%; in 1988, it had increased to 58.4%. Statistics Canada reports that by 1993 women's participation in the labour force had declined to 57.5%. This decline reflects the overall downturn in the economy. It is interesting to note that, although the participation rate of women remains well below that of men, the latter actually declined from 75.9% in 1990 to 73.3% in 1993. From the mid 1970s to the late 1980s there was a sharp rise in the participation of married women in the paid labour force. In 1975, married women's participation rate was 41.6%; in 1988, it was 59.1%. Today, marital status makes little difference to women's participation in the labour force or their employment levels.

It is important to know the types of work women do if we are to have an accurate picture of their paid workplace experiences. According to 1993 Statistics Canada data, the vast majority of women (86%) work in the service industry, particularly in business and personal services. The service sector is generally characterized by higher levels of part time work, lower rates of unionization, lower wages and poorer working conditions. This concentration has coincided with changes in the nature of demand for labour that have occurred over recent years. A general decline in the goods-producing sector has been accompanied by an increase in the service sector. Male representation in the labour force tends to be more evenly distributed, with higher representation in the higher paying job categories.

Even when one examines the professional, managerial and administrative category, where women account for 47% of the labour force, their distribution within this category is skewed in favour of certain jobs, traditionally "female occupations," such as teaching, social work and nursing. To some extent, these figures help to account for the earnings gap between men and women.

In January 1993, the fact that the "wage gap" between Canadian women and men had narrowed by 2% over one year made media headlines. Figures available from Statistics Canada for 1993 showed that women working full-time earned 72% of the incomes of their male counterparts. This gradual diminishing of the wage gap between female and male workers is part

of a slow gain for women visible since the late 1960s; however, as a group women still face serious economic disadvantages.

Data released by Statistics Canada in April 1993, celebrated the fact that the number of women in the top 10 highest-paying occupations in Canada increased by 53% between 1985 and 1990. In 1985 women accounted for only 14% of those working in these occupations, whereas by 1990 they accounted for 20%. While these figures are significant, they hide the fact that even when women and men work in exactly the same occupation women's income on average is substantially less. The following table indicates the extent of the wage gap that continues to plague women in the paid labour force.

THE WAGE GAP

	Highest-Paying Professions	Average earnings in the top 10 highest paid occupations. Full-time for a full year, '90 Women made up 20% of all earners in the top 10 highest paying occupations. This is up from 14% in 1985.	
		Men	Women
Men \$79,463 Women \$48,609	Judges and magistrates	\$109,313	\$79,204
	Physicians and surgeons	111,261	73,071
	Dentists	99,280	67,997
	Lawyers and notaries	86,108	50,012
	General managers and senior officials	74,425	40,633
	Other managers and administrators	73,281	39,151
	Pilots, navigators and flight engineers	66,087	31,026
	Osteopaths and chiropractors	68,404	45,368
	Management occupations, natural sciences and engineering	66,868	41,800
	University professors	65,671	49,000

Data: Statistics Canada, 1993.

Statistics Canada reported that women earn, on average, slightly more than 60% of the earnings of their male counterparts in the ten top paying occupational categories. Women continue to dominate the 10 lowest-paying occupations and account for close to 75% of the 235,455 people working in these jobs. Significantly, the lowest paid occupation is child care, where the average earnings in 1990 were \$13,518. and where 97% of those employed are women. In the food and beverage-serving occupations, women comprise 78% of the labour force and earn an average income of \$14,100.

2. Poverty

The economic disparities between men and women have been the subject of much recent social policy research and analysis in Canada. It is apparent that many women live at or below the poverty line in Canada, despite their increased participation in the labour force. In 1961, 65% of Canadian families had a male as sole earner supporting a family with children. In 1990, of families with an income of \$30-35,000, only 10.6% were supported by a sole male earner. Among those families earning \$70-75,000, only 0.8% were supported by a sole male earner, which indicates the rising incidence of dual-earner families. Increasing divorce rates, ineffective divorce settlements and inadequate modes of ensuring the payment of child support maintenance orders, all contribute to an increased likelihood of poverty for women whose marriages have dissolved. In 1974, 57% of single-parent women were poor; in 1991, this figure had not changed.

The poverty of women who are single parents is a complex issue. There is no question that marriage breakdown leads to higher risks of poverty for women and their children. Single mothers are not always women who were formerly married, however; growing numbers of unmarried women, particularly teenagers, choose to keep their children whereas in earlier days they might have given them up for adoption. This helps to account for the differences in income between married and single-parent mothers as outlined in the National Council of Welfare's report, *Women and Poverty Revisited*.

The report found that women who are single parents were more likely than married mothers to have entered their first union and to have had a child when they were still teenagers. With respect to education, married mothers also tended to be at an advantage. Single-parent mothers were more likely to have less than a Grade 11 education and less likely to have post-secondary or university degrees. The report indicates that these realities are generally the result of a chain of events triggered by early pregnancy, that includes dropping out of school, having limited access to work opportunities and child care and thus increased likelihood of a reliance on social assistance. In combination, these conditions make it difficult, if not impossible, to break the chain of poverty.

Unfortunately, much contemporary research also indicates that most women in Canada can expect to spend their later years in poverty. This is often accounted for by their longer life expectancy and the resulting increased likelihood that they will spend their later years on their own. In the Canadian population aged 65-69, only 60% of the women are married, compared to 84% of the men. When we examine those aged 80 and over, only 15% of the women are married, compared to 58% of the men. Moreover, simply living alone or with non-relatives translates into a greater likelihood of poverty. Women who do so have the highest poverty rates after single-parent mothers, with 44% of them aged 65 and over being poor in 1987, as were 33% of those under 65.

Statistics show that 45% of unattached women between 70 and 74 live in poverty. The figures increase to 57% for women 75-79 years of age and skyrocket to 75% for women 80 years of age and over.

Part of the explanation for such high poverty rates for the elderly lies in the inadequacy of existing income security programs. The National Council of Welfare has determined that in 1992 maximum benefits from the Old Age Security pension and the Guaranteed Income Supplement for a couple living in a large city were more than \$2,000 below the poverty line. For unattached pensioners living in a large city, the gap was \$3,460.

Elderly women are also much less likely than men to receive employment-related pension income, the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and the Quebec Pension Plan (QPP). In 1987, for example, women received 47% of the CPP or QPP benefits received by men, and they received only 31% of men's average income from occupational pensions. These facts make the prospect of surviving to the age of 70 and beyond bleak for women, particularly for those who live alone.

D. Social Issues

1. Violence

At present, the issue of violence against women is receiving relatively wide-scale social attention in Canada. Thus, many groups who speak on this issue, both those who operate under the broad umbrella of the women's movement and certain men's groups,

argue that economic dependence and unequal power relationships are at the root of the problem and present formidable barriers to women attempting to leave violent living situations.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women recently noted that a quarter of Canadian women are sexually abused at some time in their lives and that half of these women are abused before they reach 17 years of age. As noted earlier, one-tenth of Canadian women are victims of domestic violence; between 1990 and 1992 more than 100 Canadian women were killed by their male partners.

These facts have not gone unnoticed by Canadian women's groups, who have, over the past 20 years, been actively involved in meeting the immediate needs of women victims of sexual assault and battering. While current national statistics are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that in 1985-86, 230 women's shelters served 172,592 women and children in need of immediate protection from violent situations. Today, more than 300 transition houses offer safe refuge for women and children, while at the same time providing them with a range of counselling services.

The facts of violence against women, both in the home and elsewhere, have gained significant attention in the minds of the public and have won financial commitments from the federal government. Two federal Family Violence Initiatives, one in 1988 for \$40 million over four years and another in 1991 for \$136 million over four years, aimed to involve several federal departments in strategies to prevent family violence. In partnership with provincial and territorial governments, the aim of the Initiatives has been to involve all Canadians and to mobilize community action on this issue. The slaying of 14 women students in Montreal in December 1989 underscored the urgency of this issue for Canadian women. The House of Commons Committee on Health and Welfare, Seniors and the Status of Women established a sub-committee to investigate and make recommendations on the issue of violence against women in Canada. Its report, *War Against Women*, made a number of recommendations for altering the conditions that tend to prevent women from leaving violent situations.

One of the outcomes of this report was the establishment of a nine-member panel to undertake a comprehensive national examination of violence against women. The

panel began hearings in January 1992 following a consultation process during which the panel and its staff received input to their action plan from various groups at the community level. The panel's mandate was to examine violence against women, identify important issues, heighten public awareness, seek solutions and recommendations and devise a plan of action for both government and community groups.

In the summer of 1993, the Panel on Violence Against Women released its final report, *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence - Achieving Equality*. In addition to providing an in-depth analysis of various forms of violence against women, the report developed a framework for understanding the root causes of violence and presented a National Action Plan aimed at providing solutions to the problem. The National Action Plan begins from the assumption that ending violence and achieving gender equality are related and complementary goals that must be pursued simultaneously. To that end, the plan comprises an Equality Action Plan and a plan for achieving zero tolerance of violence.

The Equality Action Plan addresses issues such as women's public and political participation, equal access to the legal system, institutional mechanisms for achieving gender equity and economic issues such as labour force participation and child care.

The adoption of a Zero Tolerance Policy means, according to the panel's report, "making a firm commitment to the philosophy that no amount of violence is acceptable, and that adequate resources must be made available to eliminate violence and achieve equality." The policy includes an accountability framework that identifies criteria for establishing zero tolerance of violence in organizations, institutions and workplaces and outlines possible steps for the implementation of policies and mechanisms to help ensure ongoing commitment.

The issue of violence against women was highlighted again in November 1993 with the release of a Statistics Canada report based on a survey of 12,300 Canadian women who were questioned on their experiences of physical and sexual abuse as defined by the *Criminal Code*. Among the conclusions were that:

- 51% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once since they were 16 years of age;

- one in five of the incidents was serious enough to result in physical injury;
- 28% of injuries required medical attention;
- 25% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of a husband or common-law partner; and
- children witnessed 40% of the violent episodes; many experts suggest that witnessing violence makes male children more likely to become violent in their intimate relationships.

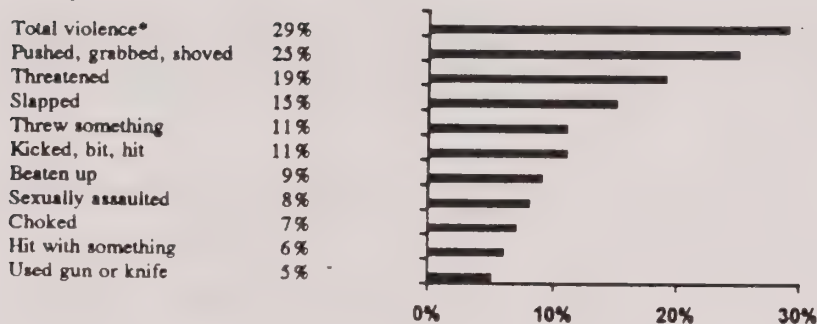
The findings of this latest study have underscored the urgent need for attention to this issue, according to many women's groups. The Secretary of State for the Status of Women recently confirmed interest in the development of a national education plan to increase public awareness of issues of violence against women. Women's groups have indicated their desire for increased funding of services.

TABLE I
WHO GETS HURT IN JUST ONE YEAR
Number of women 18 years and over
who have experienced violence in the past 12 months

	Total Female Population	Total Women Victimized (Past 12 Months)	
Total	10,498,000	1,016,000	10%
<u>Age Group</u>			
18-24	1,315,000	353,000	27
25-34	2,338,000	331,000	14
35-44	2,256,000	191,000	8
45-54	1,628,000	91,000	6
55 and over	2,961,000	49,000	2
<u>Household Income</u>			
Less than \$15,000	1,324,000	166,000	13
\$15,000-\$29 999	1,860,000	198,000	11
\$30,000-\$59 000	3,580,000	312,000	9
\$60,000 or more	2,036,000	197,000	10
Not stated/Don't know	1,698,000	142,000	8
<u>Education</u>			
Less than high school diploma	2,747,000	207,000	8
High school diploma	2,805,000	260,000	9
Some post secondary education	3,299,000	401,000	12
University degree	1,628,000	148,000	9

Source: Statistics Canada, *The Violence Against Women Survey*, November 1993.

TABLE II
HOW MARRIED WOMEN ARE HURT
Proportion of Canada's 9 million women who have ever been
married or lived common-law, who reported assault by a partner
(18 years and over)



* Figures do not add to 100% because of multiple responses.

Source: Statistics Canada, *The Violence Against Women Survey*, November 1993.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) reminds us that the provincial budgets for programs offering counselling and refuge for women leaving violent situations are being stretched to their limit. The heavy reliance on voluntary unpaid labour (mostly female) leaves these services in a precarious position as the demand for such labour often rises during times of economic uncertainty. Evidence links an increase in violence to intense stress brought on by long-term unemployment and household financial insecurity.

In the spring of 1991, an additional concern became highly publicized: the sexual abuse of patients (the majority of which are women) by their physicians. The Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons commissioned an independent task force to examine this issue. Its preliminary report was released on 27 May 1991. The Task Force heard from approximately 300 people and held public hearings throughout the spring of 1991. Report recommendations cover an expansive range of issues, including the necessity of gender-sensitive training for physicians and for the public. The report also recommended that an implementation committee be created to implement and monitor the recommendations. The Canadian Medical Association has begun to follow up on these recommendations.

2. Health

Out of a concern for women's physical safety comes the recognition that women's health care needs differ from those of men. As early as the mid-1960s, a number of groups, often formed at the community level, argued that women's experiences needed to be incorporated into health care delivery.

A great deal of attention has been focused on women's reproductive capacity. Statistics Canada reports that approximately 70% of hospitalization of women between the ages of 20 and 44 is related to their reproductive capacity or to problems and diseases of their reproductive organs.

Today, technological changes have given rise to a range of reproductive possibilities. The "new reproductive technologies" (NRTs) include such options as: *in vitro* fertilization (the egg and sperm are fertilized outside the body and then transferred to the body for growth and development), embryo transfer and prenatal diagnostic techniques. These issues were studied by the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies, whose final report was released on 30 November 1993. The Commission also examined the issue of infertility and considered social, ethical, health, research, legal and economic implications of the new technologies.

A number of social analysts working in this field have emphasized the fact that these technological advances are "double-edged swords"; while they do provide a greater range of possibilities for women unable to conceive without such assistance, there are questions about their long-term health impacts, relatively low success rates, high costs and attendant social, ethical and legal questions. The report proposed 293 actions regarding NRTs. These proposals include banning surrogate motherhood and sex-selection clinics that allow parents to determine the sex of their child before birth and restricting health coverage of *in vitro* fertilization to women with dual-blocked fallopian tubes.

On 14 June 1996, the government introduced legislation (Bill C-47, An Act respecting human reproductive technologies and commercial transactions relating to human reproduction) to prohibit 13 unacceptable practices in connection with new reproductive technologies and genetics. The unacceptable practices include such things

as cloning, sex selection for non-medical reasons, and commercial arrangements such as surrogacy. The government is now working on a second piece of legislation that will regulate acceptable practices with a view to having comprehensive legislation in this area in place by 1997.

As indicated by the report of the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Women's Health (*Working Together: For Women's Health*), the number of pressing issues in this field continues to grow. A survey, conducted in 1986 by Health and Welfare Canada identified breast cancer and other female cancers as key issues. Between one in nine and one in ten women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime; it is estimated that the years of life lost as a result of breast cancer exceed those lost as a result of lung cancer by more than 45%. A recent cause for concern among women's groups is that the amount of research dollars and years of research effort directed toward breast cancer is not consistent with its rising incidence in North America. **In 1996, it is estimated that some 17,000 Canadian women will be diagnosed with breast cancer.**

In October 1991, the Sub-Committee on the Status of Women (the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women) began the first ever national study of breast cancer and the Meme implant. The Sub-Committee heard various witnesses in the field of epidemiology, breast cancer research, education and detection, as well as representatives of the growing number of breast cancer advocacy and support groups in Canada. The final report of the Sub-Committee, *Breast Cancer: Unanswered Questions*, made 49 recommendations. Among the most important of these was the call for a Breast Cancer Challenge Fund to be started with seed money from the federal government. The Report suggested that the federal government should challenge business and industry to match the federal funds, and that the money should be used for new research into the causes of breast cancer. Other recommendations included: that more attention be directed to instruction in breast self examination, the establishment of an advisory panel to review the National Breast Screening Study, and the establishment of national guidelines on screening mammography, particularly in women under 50 years of age.

The Report criticized the current levels of direct funding to breast cancer, which will claim the lives of approximately 5,500 women in Canada this year. At the time of the report, it was estimated that from all sources (non-government, government and private) approximately \$3.1 million was directed specifically to breast cancer research in Canada. The Report also called into question the efficacy of current approaches to research on cancer in general and breast cancer in particular. The process of "peer review," where applications for the funding of cancer research are reviewed with little or no opportunity for input from the public, was cited as needing to be reconsidered.

The federal government response to the Sub-Committee report was made public in December 1992. Research on breast cancer was seen as a national priority and \$20 million over five years was committed to the Canadian Breast Cancer Research Challenge Fund. An additional \$2.7 million over five years was directed to funding for five existing cancer centres or other health care institutions for the development of Breast Cancer Information Exchange Projects. For training and education of health care professionals, for provincial breast screening programs, and for the development of uniform care standards, there was an allotment of another \$2.3 million.

An additional outcome of the Sub-Committee report and the federal government response was the convening of the National Forum on Breast Cancer, held in Montreal, 14-16 November 1993. This forum, noteworthy for its organizational format, saw women survivors of breast cancer, physicians, researchers, surgeons, oncologists and organizations like the Canadian Cancer Society, talking about issues such as prevention, screening, care, support and advocacy. In small discussion groups, participants identified critical issues of concern, selected priorities and proposed action plans for bringing about change in a number of practices related to breast cancer. In November 1996, the First Canada-U.S. Breast Cancer Advocacy Conference will be held, in Orillia, Ontario. One aim of the conference is to build a coalition of breast cancer support advocacy groups across Canada and to create a body that will serve as a national voice on breast cancer.

A further health issue that has become increasingly high-profile in recent years is related to women's mental health. The Canadian Mental Health Association's report

Women and Mental Health: Strategies for Change, served to highlight a number of important issues for women, including the fact that mental health is closely related to the impact of the larger socio-economic environment. The nature and history of psychiatric and mental health services have tended to adopt models of behaviour based on the experiences of men. Such an orientation is highly problematic for women facing difficult circumstances. Perhaps as a result of this gender-biased orientation, women are prescribed mood-altering drugs at significantly higher rates than men. In order to address the mental health needs of women, it will be necessary for those working in the area to take account of the social, economic and cultural context of women's lives.

Occupational health problems facing female workers have been a concern for a number of years but are receiving additional attention in the 1990s. While women have always worked, they have tended to be concentrated in relatively few types of jobs and the associated health risks have been inadequately researched. Several federal departments have taken initiatives in this area. A 1991 study by Karen Messing entitled *Occupational Health and Safety Concerns of Canadian Women* was published by Labour Canada. The following year, Health and Welfare Canada organized a Research Round Table on Gender and Workplace Health at which national and international experts discussed a range of issues. These included: occupational exposures and reproductive health, mental health and workplace stress, work and family responsibilities, irregular work, substance abuse and the workplace, and AIDS and the workplace.

3. Political Issues

It is very likely that the opportunity and the will to address issues of importance to women will increase if women assume positions of greater power in contemporary society. That the "personal is political" has been one of the central organizing philosophies of the women's movement in North America. Such a philosophy has put previously defined "personal" issues such as child care, abortion, battering, rape and sexual harassment on the broader "political" agenda of many countries, including Canada.

Women's participation in formal politics has undergone a substantial transformation in recent years. In particular, great strides were made during the federal

elections of 1984 and 1988. In 1984, 27 women were elected to the House of Commons. This number represented an almost 100% increase over the 1980 election results. A similar trend was evident during the 1988 election, when 12 more women were elected. There has also been an increase in the number of women candidates. In 1974, women accounted for less than 10% of the candidates, whereas in 1988 they accounted for close to 20%. In 1993, 53 women were elected to the House of Commons, making their representation in Parliament the strongest to date.

Despite these encouraging figures, the now disbanded Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women pointed out that if women continued to increase their number of elected seats at the same rate as they did between 1984 and 1988, and if the number of seats in the House of Commons remained at 295, it would take nine elections, or nearly 45 years, for an equal number of women and men to be elected to the House of Commons.

In general, women have made greater formal political strides at the provincial than at the federal level. At the provincial level, they have a greater likelihood of holding ministerial status, which affords them considerably more power, and the 1980s saw a number of women leaders in provincial political parties. In no region, however, do women account for anywhere close to 50% of those elected at the provincial level.

Municipal politics appears to be a fertile ground for the active participation of women politicians, both in large urban centres and small rural towns, although more so in the former than the latter. Women's relatively greater degree of participation at this level may stem from the more limited travel requirements involved, as well as the lesser degree of financial backing necessary. It may also be that women find their immediate interests more compatible with issues raised at the municipal level.

Apart from these positive changes, there continue to be barriers facing women in formal politics and in other areas of influence, such as the judiciary, large corporations, Crown corporations, various agencies and the senior positions in the federal bureaucracy. Women continue to be under-represented in all these categories, and thus their ability to alter the existing social arrangements through legislative and policy channels remains constrained.

A variety of proposals for altering the prevailing situation have been put forward by women's groups across the country. These proposals range from support for a

system of proportional representation, to the inclusion of a new dimension, gender representation, in the electoral system. Additional proposals, and those which appear to garner the most support, call for the setting of specific numerical targets for female candidates and representatives in the national political parties.

4. Social Security Review

In the Speech from the Throne on 18 January 1994, the government announced its intention to reform Canada's social security system within two years. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources Development was given the mandate to undertake consultations, in two phases. In the first phase, the Committee was asked to prepare an interim report on the concerns and priorities of individuals and groups with respect to a broad range of social security issues, including education, employment, training, social assistance, child care and income security.

The second phase of the review process, completed in mid-December 1994, saw the Committee travel across the country hearing the responses of individuals and groups to the Discussion Paper *Improving Social Security in Canada*, released in October 1994. As part of the second phase, a National Consultation of Women's Groups on Social Security Reform was held in Ottawa from 3-5 December 1994. Some 80 participants represented groups from a wide variety of constituencies across the country. The presentation on the outcome of the consultation was attended by the Minister of Human Resources Development, the Minister of Finance and the Secretary of State Responsible for the Status of Women.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources Development issued its final report, *Security, Opportunities and Fairness: Canadians Renewing Their Social Program*, on 6 February 1995. The report recognized the importance of the social security review for the lives of Canadian women and it emphasized the need to subject changes to the social security system to a gender analysis. Additional recommendations of concern to women are listed below:

- The Committee recommends that to alleviate the high levels of women's poverty, reforms to social programs must eliminate occupational and financial barriers to

women's economic advancement and promote an equitable sharing of work and family responsibilities.

- The Committee recommends that increased access to education and training programs is necessary to enhance job opportunities and to offer a broader range of career options for women.
- Making the links between violence, inequality and poverty will ensure that social security programs meet the specific needs of women. The Committee recommends that the linkages between these factors affecting women be addressed in the reform process.

A number of issues bearing specifically on the well-being of women are likely to be affected by the most recent restructuring of social security funding in Canada. 1 April 1996 saw the demise of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and the introduction of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). The CHST introduces fundamental changes to the federal government's role in social programs; many of the changes will have implications for women. The CHST replaces all previous programs whereby Ottawa sent money to the provinces for health, post-secondary education and welfare. Federal money is now transferred to the provinces on a lump sum basis, leaving the provinces to decide upon its allocation among the three areas. Some women's groups have expressed concern that provinces may redirect money away from social assistance funding into health or post-secondary education as they see fit. Such decisions could have a negative impact on social assistance levels and be detrimental to many lone-parent families, the majority of which are headed by women and are already living at or below the poverty line.

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION

A. Institutional Mechanisms to Improve the Status of Women

A turning point in the history of the Canadian women's movement was the establishment, in February 1967, of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW). The RCSW was given a mandate to "ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all

aspects of Canadian society." In February 1970, the RCSW published its report, which made over 150 recommendations on the socio-economic, political and cultural status of women. Among these were calls for the establishment of institutional mechanisms in Canadian society aimed at enhancing women's status. In March 1995, significant changes were made to a variety of such institutional mechanisms set up to address the status of women in Canada. A major reorganization resulted in the consolidation of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), the Women's Program of Human Resources Development Canada and Status of Women Canada (SWC).

The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) had been formed in response to one of the RCSW recommendations. The Council was an "arms length" organization established to advise the federal government on issues pertaining to women and to maintain ongoing contact with the provinces and territories through their representation on the Council. The Council was composed of four full-time members, a president, three vice-presidents, and 26 other members from the provinces and territories, appointed for three-year terms. The CACSW was well known for its ability to produce independent research studies that were widely distributed to women's groups and to individuals, groups and networks with an interest in women's issues.

The Women's Program at Human Resources Development Canada was formerly known as The Secretary of State - Women's Program; it was created in 1973 in recognition of the fact that voluntary organizations working to improve the economic and social conditions of women required assistance. The Women's Program promoted greater participation by women in all aspects of society, particularly in decision-making and the political process, and worked to increase the capability and effectiveness of women's organizations working in that area.

Status of Women Canada is the federal government department with a mandate to ensure the integration of women's equality issues and concerns into all federal government legislation, policies, programs and initiatives. SWC works as both an initiator and in partnership with federal departments, all other levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and in the international arena, to ensure the advancement of women.

As a result of the recent reorganization, the HRD's Women's Program joined SWC. The closing of the CACSW saw the transfer of its research, communication and public information functions to SWC. Press releases at the time of the reorganization emphasized the importance and the advantages of creating a "single-window" for the operation and administration of women's equality issues and initiatives. Moreover, the government underscored that the amalgamation could increase the potential for strengthening direct links with local, regional and national women's organizations, universities and other agencies and could thus have a positive impact on the policy process. Critics, on the other hand, question the ability of a government department to carry out independent research and produce analysis that is critical of government policy, programs and legislation. SWC has consulted with women's groups, academics and other involved parties in order to develop a research approach that will continue the independent work of the CACSW. It is expected that SWC will make public the results of the consultation in the very near future.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was formed in 1971 with a mandate to "evaluate and advocate changes to benefit women." Today NAC represents approximately 250 women's groups from across the country and operates as an "umbrella" organization which speaks on behalf of close to three million women. NAC's funding base was subject to a 5% reduction in 1995-96. Future funding to women's groups is also under review for upcoming years. As a result of cuts, NAC's Ottawa office closed on 30 September 1995.

B. Legislation

In 1983, the federal government appointed Judge Rosalie Abella to administer the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment. Its report, tabled in 1984, introduced the concept of "employment equity." Employment equity programs have also been known historically as "affirmative action" programs. Their main purpose is to enhance the labour market opportunities for disadvantaged groups (women, visible minorities, disabled persons and aboriginal people) by ensuring that employers' hiring practices are not biased in favour of certain groups.

In 1986, the federal government adopted the Employment Equity Act (Bill C-62), which requires all federally-regulated companies and Crown corporations with 100 or more employees to implement employment equity procedures and provide annual reports on them. Some women's groups and groups representing other disadvantaged workers feel that the Act requires strengthening. For example, despite the fact that employers are required to implement programs and report on them, sanctions are imposed only for failure to report. Companies who fail to take action are not penalized.

The original legislation included a proviso for review of the Act. A special House of Commons committee was formed for this purpose in December 1991. The Special Committee report *A Matter of Fairness* was tabled in the House of Commons in May 1992. The Report made a number of recommendations aimed at improving and strengthening the *Employment Equity Act*. Among the most important recommendations was the call to broaden the scope of the Act to include: the federal Public Service, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canadian Armed Forces, House of Commons, Senate, Library of Parliament and all federal boards, agencies and commissions. The current focus of the Act is on federally regulated employers with 100 or more employees. The Report recommended that the jurisdiction should apply to employers who have 75 or more employees and that employers who initiate plans for employment equity programs should be recognized and designated as "employment equity employers." The report also discussed the need for a National Employment Equity Strategy and recommended that the Canadian Human Rights Commission be designated as the body for enforcement of the legislation.

In December 1994, the Minister of Human Resources Development tabled Bill C-64, An Act respecting employment equity. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons undertook a study of the bill as part of its comprehensive review of the *Employment Equity Act*. Major recommendations of the Standing Committee's report included support for extending employment equity to the federal public sector and the designation of the Canadian Human Rights Commission as an enforcement body for the Act.

For the most part, legislation on "pay equity" or "equal pay for work of equal value" falls within provincial jurisdiction. There are a number of key debates with respect to

this principle. Early attempts to deal with gender-based wage discrepancies required employers to provide equal pay for women and men performing the same or similar work. However, this format proved to be partly ineffective, due to the fact that women are highly concentrated in some jobs such as clerical activities, domestic labour, sales and service. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to compare these women's salaries with those of men, as few men were employed in these categories.

More recent attempts have focused on the notion of comparing men's and women's work, weighing the skills, effort, responsibility and working conditions of jobs. Such a system enables comparisons to be made between jobs where men and women are concentrated in different categories (i.e., secretarial compared with maintenance or janitorial work) within an organization. The problem with this system has been its tendency to be *re-active* rather than *pro-active*. Employees are, by and large, responsible for filing complaints and fighting the battles entailed.

A pro-active stance with respect to pay equity requires employers to evaluate their jobs in a non-discriminatory manner in order to ensure that women receive equal pay for work of equal value. Ontario has adopted this format for legislation for almost all employees under provincial jurisdiction. Manitoba, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, on the other hand, have adopted it for public sector employees only.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1880-1917 - The early women's movement focused on concerns such as health, poverty, prostitution and temperance. This is often referred to as a period of "maternal" or "social" feminism.
- 1917 - Women serving in the military, or who had a close male relative serving, were granted federal voting rights.
- 1918 - All women in Canada were granted the right to vote in federal elections.
- 1920 - Women were given the right to stand for federal election.

- 1921 - Agnes MacPhail, the first woman parliamentarian, was elected to the House of Commons.
- 1948 - Canada signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. This document included a recognition of human rights regardless of sex.
- 1967 - The Royal Commission on the Status of Women was established.
- 1970 - The Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its report, which included more than 150 recommendations.
- 1971 - The first federal Minister Responsible for the Status of Women was appointed. The Status of Women, Office of the Co-ordinator was created in the Privy Council Office. The founding conference of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women was held.
- 1973 - The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women was created. The Secretary of State Women's Program was established.
- 1976 - Status of Women ceased to be part of the Privy Council and Status of Women Canada was established as a separate bureau within the federal Public Service.
- 1980 - The United Nations declared the start of the Decade for Women.
- 1981 - Canada ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which commits the country to take appropriate measures to ensure the full development and advancement of women in the political, social, economic and cultural realms.
- 1983 - The Royal Commission on Equality in Employment was established and reported in 1984. Within this context, the concept of "employment equity" was developed.
- 1985 - The World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women was held in Nairobi. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (a blueprint for action on a range of issues affecting women) were developed.
- 1986 - Employment Equity Bill (Bill C-62) was passed.
- 1988 - On 28 January, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that Canada's existing abortion law violated the constitutional guarantee of rights

and freedoms. This decision left Canada without legislation on abortion.

- 1989 - On 6 December, 14 women engineering students were murdered at École Polytechnique in Montreal.
- 1990 - Canada played host to the Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs Meeting.
- 1991 - House of Commons Committee on Health and Welfare, Seniors and the Status of Women's Sub-Committee on Status of Women released its report *War Against Women*.
- 1992 - House of Commons Committee on Health and Welfare, Seniors and the Status of Women's Sub-Committee on the Status of Women released its report *Breast Cancer: Unanswered Questions*.
- 1992 - The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women released its interim report, *A Progress Report*.
- 1993 - The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women released its final report, *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence - Achieving Equality*. This contained more than 400 recommendations directed to all levels of government, social institutions, communities and individuals.
- 1994 - The Federal Court of Appeal ruled discriminatory the current system whereby child support paid by non-custodial parents (mostly men) is treated as a tax exemption for the payors and as taxable income, and therefore subject to tax, for the recipients (mostly women). Shortly after the ruling, the federal government announced its intention to appeal the decision. This move has met with wide opposition from women's groups. The government intends to hold consultations on this issue in an effort to develop options for a series of changes to the child-support tax system.
- 1995 - The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) was disbanded. A reorganization at Status of Women in Canada (SWC) resulted in the transfer of CACSW's research, communication and public information functions to SWC. The Women's Program, formerly at HRD, was also folded into SWC operations.

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